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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 NEW DELHI 008463

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SUBJECT: CRUCIAL MUSLIM CONSTITUENCY SPLIT BEFORE IMPENDING UTTAR PRADESH ELECTIONS

REF: NEW DELHI 8243

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Classified By: Political Counselor Ted Osius for reasons 1.4 (B,D)

11. (C) Summary: The crucial state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) is facing an election in early 2007 that could displace the current Samajwadi Party (SP) government. Muslims have long been considered a crucial SP "vote bank." A December 11-13 trip to the Muslim dominated areas of Rampur, Moradabad and Bareilly revealed that the SP's once-solid Muslim support has begun to fray along geographic lines. UP is a large state, which is a loose amalgam of disparate regions. In the Western UP cities of Rampur and Moradabad, it was evident that the ruling Samajwadi Party (SP) had a strong organizational base, and despite some second thoughts, most Muslims still planned to support the party. The city of Bareilly is on the edge of Eastern UP, where it appears Congress has begun to make inroads with Muslims. In addition, the Muslims seem to be splitting along sectarian lines, with Deobandis still strongly in the SP camp, while the far more numerous Barelvis are flirting with Congress. The Shia, who predominate in the state capital of Lucknow, are themselves split into pro-SP and pro-Congress factions. The SP has long counted on strong Muslim support to fend off challenges from its rivals. If the Muslims begin to split, it could undermine SP support on election day and threaten the party's continued rule in Lucknow. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) New Delhi's POL and ECON sections, along with the Consulates, will continue to take the economic and political temperature of key states over the next year. Such snapshots will give us a better sense of how local trends affect national politics, and ultimately, US foreign policy goals. Uttar Pradesh (UP), one of the "bellwether" states, is facing a state election in early 2007. Poloff and POL FSN traveled to Muslim majority areas in the West of the state to the cities of Moradabad, Bareilly, and Rampur December 11-13. This region is home to a significant Muslim minority, which will play a crucial role in the UP's early 2007 election. During the visit, Poloff and POL FSN met with a cross-section of Muslims, from influential opinion leaders to ordinary villagers to gauge their thoughts on the election and attempts by the various political parties to win their loyalty. We hope these reports will give Washington readers better insight into the vast India outside Delhi's Ring Road and the economic, security and social trends that will determine where India is headed over the long run.

Cementing the Muslim Vote Bloc

¶3. (U) In another indicator of his determination to cement the Muslims behind his ruling Samajwadi Party (SP), Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav on December 18 announced a string of Islamic-centric concessions and lambasted the rival Congress for its purported evil designs against Muslims. Addressing a meeting of Muslim educators in Lucknow, Yadav warned that Congress was working in league with the BJP to

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short-change Muslims. He then announced that his government would extend financial aid to 100 madrassas, sanctioned 20 million rupees (USD 450,000) for the construction of a new office complex for the state madrassa board in Lucknow, added 34 new positions to the board, and trumpeted the upgrading of 160 madrassas and provision of free mid-day meals to all madrassa students in the state. Yadav pointed out that under his government the percentage of Muslims in the state police and paramilitary forces increased to 14 percent, the highest of any state in India. He urged Muslims to support the SP to combat the communal agenda of Congress and the BJP.

Moradabad - Lukewarm on Yadav

¶4. (C) Moradabad is home to UP's brass industry, which is dominated by Muslim craftsmen. Although estimates are unreliable, approximately 60 percent of the population is Muslim. Muslim interlocutors in Moradabad acknowledged to Poloff that Muslim support for the ruling SP was slipping, as evidenced by its poor showing in the recently concluded municipal elections. Despite this, Moradabad was one of the few SP victories, as a highly-regarded Muslim community leader won the mayoral election under the SP banner, winning a plurality of both Hindu and Muslim votes. Muslims argued that the victory was due more to his personal status than to Muslim support for the SP, with most claiming that the Muslim vote was no longer solidly behind the ruling party. One prominent businessman noted that Muslims had "respect" for UP Congress President Salman Khurshid and theorized that his party could do well in Moradabad if it fielded strong Muslim candidates. Muslims, whose brass factories must rely on expensive diesel generators to function, expressed strong resentment of what they called SP "discrimination" against Moradabad in power allocation. They noted that neighboring Rampur, home to the SP Power Minister Azam Khan, enjoyed electric power 24 hours per day, while Moradabad, with a much more extensive industrial base, was lucky to receive power for four hours in a day. Muslims complained that while Moradabad was represented by MPs and MLAs from the SP, they

seemed to have little influence in Lucknow and could not deliver the goods for the city.

15. (C) Moradabad has few Dalits and the BSP is very weak there. In addition, the Muslim majority ensures that the BJP will never get a foothold in the city. This means that political contests are usually between candidates from the SP and Congress. Muslims in Moradabad expressed strong resentment of BSP Chief Mayawati's recent remarks characterizing the state's Muslims as "fundamentalists," and her previous stints as Chief Minister heading a coalition government with the hated BJP. They pointed out that Mulayam could be in serious trouble next year, as both the BJP and Congress are determined to knock Mulayam out of power and are not above strategic cooperation to ensure the defeat of SP candidates.

Rampur - Mulayam's Pocket Borough

16. (C) Rampur, with a 70 percent Muslim population, has the

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highest percentage of Muslims of any locality outside of Jammu and Kashmir. It is also the home constituency of UP Power Minister Azam Khan, a close associate of Chief Minister Yadav. He has used his position to lavish spending on Rampur and lock it in to the SP fold as a virtual pocket borough. Driving around the city it is hard to miss the new bus station, just completed last year, and the newly widened and paved main streets. It is no coincidence that the new avenues are brightly lit by impressive rows of new street lights which remain on throughout the night. In addition, Rampur is home to a new University, which although private, was arranged by the SP power structure. It is slated to have 30,000 students and will provide much-needed engineering and computer training to local Muslims in an area with few industries or employment opportunities. Large signboards on every major intersection in the city remind the population of the source of all of this largesse.

17. (C) Somewhat incongruously, the city's only industrial concern is a distillery, which markets rum and whiskey throughout India, Africa and the Middle East. Fully 40 percent of the plant's 3,000 employees are local Muslims. The traditional landlord, trader and professional elite has been increased by a new nouveau riche class of bureaucrats, professionals and businessmen who have come up under the SP dispensation and have constructed new marble mansions along the once staid "civil lines." With the city going so well under the SP, there was no sign of the presence of any other political party.

Elite Hedging its Bets

18. (C) Poloff and POL FSN met the Rampur elite at a wedding on December 11. All agreed that the formerly robust Congress organization in Rampur has all but disappeared, and were confident that the SP would be returned to power in the upcoming election. However, interlocutors anticipated that the upcoming election would be a close and bitter affair that could remain in contention up until the last minute. The consensus was that the SP would have to form a coalition government but its shape would only be determined after the votes were tallied. Muslims expressed universal resentment against Mayawati for her public remarks characterizing the state's Muslim community as "dangerous fundamentalists. In private, they agreed that both Mulayam and Mayawati are without principles or ideology and are totally corrupt, saying that Mayawati is "unreliable" and willing to form a coalition with anyone to come to power. They predicted that any coalition formed by her BSP party is likely to be short-lived, as she has a habit of "dumping" her allies whenever it suits her.

¶9. (C) Muslims in Rampur remained suspicious of Mulayam and did not totally reject rumors that the SP and BSP had reached a secret agreement. The rumor states that the BJP has conceded the Muslims to Mulayam and has agreed to sponsor communal riots in the state to spread fear among Muslims. This allows Mulayam to portray himself as the protector of Muslims, and the BJP to harden its core Hindutva constituency. The rumor further alleges that both parties

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have not ruled out a future coalition government after the election.

¶10. (C) The Muslim elite fully expects Congress to declare President's rule and dismiss the Mulayam government in the months preceding the election. Some expressed guarded praise for Rahul Gandhi, saying his presence and activities have revived the party. Despite this, Congress was likely to remain in fourth place after the SP, BSP and BJP in the aftermath of the election, although it will increase its seats at the expense of SP. They commented that Mulayam has built a strong organization in the rural areas of Western UP, especially among the illiterate, and is ready to depict himself as a victim of Congress persecution and rally the support of the masses who have little understanding of the constitutional issues involved. Depending on how she fares, Mayawati will try to stake her claim at forming the government by allying with either Congress or the BJP. Having betrayed her allies repeatedly, however, she has little credibility and is "playing a dangerous game," that could lead to the destruction of her party. Several informants felt that in the new era of accountability being ushered in by the UPA government, Mayawati's conviction in the "Taj Corridor Case," is inevitable. (She has been charged with illegally initiating a tourism project involving the Taj Mahal for her personal gain).

Bareilly - Congress Guardedly Optimistic

¶11. (C) Congress is experiencing a mini-revival in Bareilly (a Muslim majority city of approximately four million). Unlike Rampur, there are few signs of the SP in the city, which had just elected a Congress mayor (a female Hindu) for the first time in many years. Although there are SP posters and wall-paintings, they must share space with those of the other major parties. The surprise Congress victory in the mayoral race had shifted attention to Congress, which had long been dormant in the area, and a cross-section of Muslim community leaders told Poloff that they were now seriously thinking of leaving regional parties and switching over to Congress. They felt that Congress now had an opportunity and could create a groundswell of support. Muslims expressed strong admiration for Sonia Gandhi and Manmohan Singh, with many stating they were "fed up" with regional party corruption. The Muslims tended to view both Gandhi and Singh as honest and incorruptible. They also expressed guarded support for UP Congress President Salman Khurshid and applauded recent statements by the Prime Minister that he intended to commit real money to implement the recommendations of the Sachar Report (Reftel).

The Power Behind the Throne

¶12. (C) Praveen Singh Aron is the husband of the newly-elected mayor of Bareilly and a member of the All India Congress Committee (AICC). In a December 13 meeting with Poloff, Aron made it clear that he was the power behind the throne in Bareilly and running the Congress effort to take back power. Conceding that Congress was making gains,

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particularly among the Muslims, Aron cautioned that it would

require deft political maneuvering to ensure a Congress victory in 2007. He noted that Congress rule in Delhi had both advantages and disadvantages and exclaimed that he was worried that Congress could take a beating if it failed to control inflation. Aron refused to confirm that Congress was ready to dismiss the Mulayam government, saying only that Mulayam would most certainly use violence, intimidation and vote fraud to try to capture the election and that President's rule could keep him under control. Aron assured Poloff that a Congress government would provide an honest alternative to the corruption-ridden regional parties that have looted the states and provide little governance.

Comment - A Geographic Split in the Muslim Vote Bank

¶13. (C) UP is actually a loose conglomerate of up to five distinct regions, each with its own political dynamic. Although Rampur, Moradabad and Bareilly are within several hundred kilometers from each other and each has a Muslim majority population, their political stance is dictated by geography. Rampur, and to a lesser extend Moradabad are within the Western UP region where SP has a strong presence among Muslims that will be difficult to dislodge. Bareilly is on the edge of Eastern UP, where Congress is rebuilding its organization and reviving popular Muslim support. In Eastern UP, Congress must concede the Dalit vote to Mayawati's BSP, but is actively recruiting Muslims and Brahmins into a new alliance. Congress strategists hope that the Brahmins (who constitute up to 20 percent of UP's population) will use their influence in the villages to bring in other castes. If the Congress effort succeeds in wooing away the Muslims of Eastern UP away from Mulayam, it could sufficiently undermine his support and cost him the election.

¶14. (C) There is also an internal Muslim dynamic working against the SP. Most of UP's Muslims belong to the more liberal Barelvi sect (based in Bareilly). Barelvi Muslims have begun to lose patience with Mulayam's domination of the Muslim vote and are flirting with Congress. Mulayam has consciously courted the numerically small (20 percent) and more conservative Deobandi sect. Although better organized and funded than the Barelvis, the Deobandis alone may not be sufficient to put Mulayam over the top. The Shias, who predominate in Lucknow, are split between a pro-SP faction close to the Deobandis and a pro-Congress faction closer to the Barelvis. This lack of Muslim unity could provide an opening to Congress to recruit large numbers of Muslims for the first time in several decades, while eating into the Muslim vote bank that Mulayam once considered a source of solid support.

¶15. (U) Visit New Delhi's Classified Website:
(<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/sa/newdelhi/>)

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